

Outdoors

Illinois River offers Oregon's wildest rafting trip



Rafters take on the Illinois River's Green Wall Class V rapids. WILL VOLPERT/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Zach Urness
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Editors note: Oregon's outdoors is largely closed to outdoor recreation following COVID-19 restrictions. Until that changes, the Statesman Journal will feature "greatest hits" from outdoors writer Zach Urness each week in a nod to armchair adventure and for future trip planning purposes.

This story was originally published Feb. 15, 2017

Deep and emerald green in the canyons, boiling and ill-tempered through the rapids, the Illinois River begins in the wilderness and never surrenders that independence.

The river is wild at its birth, tumbling down the Siskiyou Mountains with the reckless energy of an adolescent child, through a sunlit forest of weeping spruce and tiger lilies along the Oregon and California border.

Even when the Illinois bubbles into the mainstem near Cave Junction, in southwest Oregon, the stopover near civilization is brief. The reclusive stream wraps itself around Eight Dollar Mountain and swings west — at last turning toward the ocean — where it



A group of rafters on Southern Oregon's Illinois River. WILL VOLPERT/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

slices into a gateway of reddish-orange mountains that mark the Kalmiopsis Wilderness.

That was the place I greeted the Illinois River last May, along with a scattered collection of river guides and kayakers, at Miami Bar west of Selma.

Protected by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1984, the 31-mile wilderness run between Miami Bar (near Grants Pass) and Oak Flat (near Gold Beach) takes boaters into the isolation of Oregon's most remote country.

Rattlesnakes patrol the shores and black bears roam the edges of the river,

which got its name from miners who hailed from Illinois around 1847. The ultramafic rocks that rise above the Illinois originated in the basement of the planet — pushed up nearly 50 miles from the earth's upper mantle — and are found almost nowhere else in the world.

Both beautiful and dangerous, the Illinois will seduce you with her sights, sounds and smells, then pummel you across more than eight Class IV rapids and one notorious Class V.

Above all, the Illinois is an adventure. When you set your boat upon that emerald water and head into the mountains, you're officially leaving civilization behind.

Onto Oregon's wildest river with the right team

Will Volpert, 30, of Ashland has run the wild Illinois a whopping 39 times, getting to know the river at high flows, low flows and even with 4 inches of snow on the ground.

He grew up in a family of rafting outfitters, manning the oars when he was 13 years old. His ability to organize trips isn't shocking.

Still, his reputation on the Illinois has grown, and it's easy to see why.

"If Will Volpert ever invites you on an

Illinois trip, just go," local kayaker Nathan Barnard said. "Doesn't matter what you have going on, work, school, whatever, just go."

I took that advice, and by 5:30 p.m., our boats had launched from Miami Bar.

It was a late start, but after a quick 8 miles, we reached Pine Flat and made camp below a purple-orange sky. Tents were erected on grassy ground, as the smell of wood smoke and chicken soup wafted through the air.

Going on a trip made up almost entirely of river guides is an interesting experience. They're simultaneously the most mature and immature people you'll ever meet. One moment they'll harass you about the danger of your inadequate life jacket. The next, they'll tell you a story about the time they accidentally got their dog stoned.

In the end, you're always glad to have them, in case you need to be saved from a watery grave.

Their expertise seemed especially apt on the second day of the Illinois, where the river begins to show its teeth.

Beginning at Fawn Falls (IV), there's a section of nasty, technical rapids that seem to take pleasure in punishing boats that didn't take clean lines.

See **RAFTING, Page 2B**

Outdoor groups go virtual with access locked down

Fishing
Henry Miller
Guest columnist

To mangle an old saying, desperate times call for virtual measures.

Faced with the social-distancing requirements amid the potentially lethal coronavirus pandemic, outdoor groups are maintaining connections on the net.

Members of the Salem-based Willamette Valley Mushroom Society, as an example, held a joint April "meeting" this week with the Cascade Mycological Society via online platforms Zoom and YouTube.

The scheduled presentation (this is being written prior to the link-up) was titled "Oregon Burn Morels" with Trent Blizzard (yep, that's what he goes by), the author of "Burn Morels — a modern forager's guide to finding mushrooms."

In a similar vein, the Portland-based Oregon Bass & Panfish Club is going the virtual route.

The featured speaker for the canceled March meeting was Zip Decker — another all-time great name — offering insights into bass fishing from his nearly two-decade experience as a tournament angler and past president of the Columbia River Bassmasters.

He generously offered to do his presentation via podcast with Bass & Pan-



Social distancing was not a factor during Free Fishing Weekend at the dock at Hoover Campground in 2013. HENRY MILLER/SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

fish Club members provided the link via an "email blast."

Looks as if given the statewide closures of meeting sites and the continuing stay-home, avoid-crowds, social-distancing requirements, virtual could be the new reality for outdoor-themed groups until things get back to some sort of a new normal.

Currently, meetings and group activities such as fishing, mushroom forays, birding outings, hikes and volunteer projects have been canceled or postponed across the board through the end of April, optimistically speaking.

And opportunities for all of us are similarly pinched.

State parks and boat ramps in the Beaver State as well as access points

and recreation sites in national forests in Oregon and Washington are on lockdown.

Similar rules are in effect for group gathering spots such as city and county park playgrounds and picnic sites.

Oregon residents still can fish and hunt in-state with the admonition to keep outings close to home.

But prohibitions are in effect for out-of-staters for fishing, hunting, clamming and crabbing in Oregon and everywhere, residents included, in Washington.

In fact, outdoor adventures of late have taken on the feel of a ride on an excursion train through the Canadian Rockies, minus the fellow passengers.

It's almost exclusively a nose pressed

against the vehicle window, drive-by experience.

Digital dumpster: When my massive 3-terabyte backup external hard drive did a patty melt a couple of months ago, I lost a couple of decades of digital photos, records, writings etc.

Mostly. A lot of the stuff originally had been loaded on to a series of smaller drives both at home and at the Statesman Journal prior to retirement, with much of the contents transferred to the Godzilla drive.

Anybody else have a 750 megabyte Verbatim external drive about the size and weight of a carry-on airline bag full of rocks?

I digress. And what better project to take on during social isolation than going through five drives and 20 years of digital hoarding?

Long story longer, I found a bunch of classic photos, some that I took, others that I got from the Associated Press to use as screen savers, that definitely do not involve social distancing.

Ah, memories.

Fishing thought for the week: "A good storyteller is a person who has a good memory and hopes other people haven't." — Irvin Cobb, American humorist (1876-1944).

Contact Henry Miller via email at HenryMillerSJ@gmail.com